

Summer, 1936

Part Two

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Released at the request of Mr. Simon Barber.

For six long days Oharu had spent studying the beautiful aircraft, watching silently as first one group of mechanical genius, then another tried to make the machine run. For all their mechanical skills and wizardry, nothing any of the mechanics tried made any difference. When one of Saimmi's three young apprentices arrived the mouse felt certain that the truth would win out, yet again all that work was doomed to failure. Enamored by the craft, Amelia had spent her observation abilities on mechanical problems, not the true problem. Thus, late that last evening when the silver monoplane drifted powerless from Spontoons' skies to land with a gentle kiss into its hidden bay, Oharu sighed in defeat. There was but one possible way yet to release this curse.

All that evening, while families sat around fires, while friends spoke, Oharu worked her way up to Sacred Lake. It was not a place she liked to be, not with what lurked beneath its surface, waiting for the right mind to stumble by. As she expected none of the three children were at their self appointed posts. Of course not, after all tourists only invaded in the daytime correct? Settling herself down to rest she stared into the now black waters, her inner eyes easily seeing that mass of dark energy waiting so deep below. Whomever had placed it there had made one error. One simple error of only a meter or so placement. For to reach it would kill any priestess that tried. So deep was the stone now that there was only one way to reach it. A priestess, holding a net and large stone, would have to drop into depths so great her rib cage would collapse before she finished her decent. With luck she would get her net about the stone for others to raise, but she herself would continue falling, falling ever deeper down the ancient, slumbering volcanoes throat. Had the stone been placed less than a meter to the North it would have been within the ability of a well trained Priestess, one who knew well how to dive, to reach it and return alive.

Three little feet was all that made the difference between life, and sacrifice.

Looking up into the skies Oharu wondered who would eventually make that selfless dive. Could she? It would have to be a young woman, to bear such pain and still have the strength to finish her task. It was, as she had pieced together, how the twins who placed it originally had died. Down there, below even Oharu's mage sight lay the bodies of those who had saved Spontoons. She knew that on Cranium Island the lava had tasted at least as many lives, and under Krupmark Island even more lay under collapsed stone, to never see the sun again. European religions treated their women as trash, yet it was upon their souls that civilizations foundations were built. Evil, by its own creation, could never be defeated by a male. No, that was why women gave life. It was their task, one for Spontoons to truly be free at least one more life would be needed here. If it were to be hers she would accept the task, though not with any anticipation.

A soft sound of bare feet on grass warned her that the three had finally arrived, still she made no move. Made no attempt to defend herself as the brash young male started his chant. As his young female assistants joined in Oharu stood slowly, turned and made one movement with her right paw. All three stuttered, tried to restart their chants, then looked to each other.

"I can't feel it anymore" one of the girls admitted.

"Nor I, or I" the other two agreed. Taking off their masks the youngsters stared at the mouse who stood before them, herself not that much taller than their young selves. Stepping forward the young male's face showed anger. "What did you do to us" he demanded.

"To you? Nothing" Oharu answered. "All I did was tell the spirits you call upon that you are not yet worthy of their attention."

"You can't do that" he screamed. "They're our spirits. They come to us."

"Then call them. I will wait."

Donning their masks again the three tried again and again to call upon those they so depended upon. Called... with no answer. Finally admitting defeat they removed their masks. "So now what" the boy asked bitterly. "We become fishermen, gardeners? Who guards this lake until another is born?"

Walking forward Oharu gently took each mask away from its owner, leaning them against a nearby fallen tree. Turning to her captive audience she studied them before turning to the girls. "Undo the curse you placed on that flyer" she demanded. Happy her anger wasn't aimed at him the boy watched and waited.

"But, it just holds her here until she becomes nicer to everyone" the older girl explained. "Anyway, we don't know how. Honest."

Oharu sighed, waving the three towards her. "I will explain the law we serve under to you, once. You want to be guardians. That is good" she told them. "But you won't wait to learn how. In your rush you have doomed a woman simply because you were angered. Girls, your curse is more than you think. You have cursed her to find women attractive around the time of a full moon. Unless this curse is lifted, eventually it will twist her soul until she no longer finds males attractive. That violates one of our greatest laws, to do no harm. To force no change upon another for our own desires. You harm her now, eventually you would destroy what she is. Is that what you want?"

"No ma'm" both girls said in unison.

"And you" Oharu continued, turning her attention to the boy. "You are high priest of this group. To you is the responsibility for their actions. Aware, or not, you led them to violate a basic law. Are you ready to accept punishment for that?"

Shivering the boy still held his ground. "We didn't know" he said in excuse. "No one would teach us. Huakava refused."

"Knowing is your responsibility young one. Harming another for your own gain, in this case protecting a lake well capable of protecting itself, has no excuse. For Huakava, I am her last student. As to why she chose me, I am already trained in another path that much matches Spontoon's. I am capable of teaching myself, given a nudge in the right direction. Huakava will die before the Winter solstice, she could never teach any of you enough to be worth while."

"But everyone else said no too" the youngest cub complained.

"Because everyone already has a student, or is a student" the mouse explained. "There are not enough priestess's to go around, it is one reason I was sent here to help. As I have no full time assistant, I will teach you. If you wish. Yet I have my own path to follow. It is a path that will, when I reach its end, make the training of such as you much easier. So. If you will accept my rule over you. Then I will teach you."

She held her left paw out, a single round river stone in it. "Your path will be hard. You will do drudge work meant to teach you the patience you need. You will memorize songs, dances, stories until you can recite them in your sleep. Often even as I learn them from others. You will learn how a shrine is cared for, how to aid one in need. And then, only then when I feel you are no longer formless stones will I teach you how call upon those who guard. For only then will you know when you need their help and when simple words will suffice." She leaned forward, "Besides, I have in my time discovered that it is a great deal of fun to mess with the tourists minds. Especially those who wish to learn our religious way for 'scientific study.'"

"How long will it take, to learn all this" the boy asked.

"All your lives" Oharu answered. "Upon your last breath you will still be learning, as I will, as all priests and priestess's do. We serve, we do not rule. WE MAY NOT RULE." Her harsh voice rose, causing all three to shiver in their tracks. "No one may stand between the people and the Gods. We keep up the temples, we keep

up the shrines. We remember the rites and rituals. We serve, at the pleasure of the Gods. At the pleasure of the people. We are nothing more than the poor orphan who makes his crumb of bread by sweeping the path for others. That is the true secret of what we do. We are and always will be less than those we serve.”

“I still want to learn” the boy decided. His companions talked among themselves a few minutes before asking a question. “Where are you from?” the older girl asked.

“I was born in Cipangu, some call it Japan. At the age of eleven I decided to become a Miko. That is a Shrine Maiden. My work was to keep the sacred flame, to sweep the floors, steps and such. To remember the rituals, to aid in the banishment of evil spirits, to bless each years seeds and many more things. I came to Spontoon because your Gods asked my Gods for me.”

“Could you be a Miko again” the younger girl asked.

“I am no longer a maiden young one, only a maiden may be a Miko. I may be a priestess, I may train maidens, but I may never be what I once was. Time passes, we change, as we change we become more than we once were, or less as we decide.”

“I want to learn” both girls decided almost at the same moment.

“Do you know where I live?”

“No” all three admitted.

“Do you know where the old waterfall was, before the Great Fall?”

“Yes” the boy answered. “My sister took me there once, to show me how misuse of power changes things.”

“Then tell your parents that you will be living there until I feel you are trained enough to let visit home again. Do not worry about your lake, it is more than safe.” She sat the stone in the boy’s hand. “Your first lesson. This stone is strong is it not?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Break it. Without hitting it, break it.”

“That can’t be done” he admitted. “You have to hit it against something hard, or you can’t break it.”

“You’re certain? Wait.” Closing her eyes Oharu began to chant. It was an ancient chant even in her birth nation. For several minutes nothing happened, then with the sound of a small bell the stone, still in the boys paw, cleaved exactly in half. Opening her eyes the mouse smiled as her new students gasped in awe at what had been done. It was, in truth a simple thing, though it took much out of her as it had the one who had taught her. There were easier, less energy wasting ways to break a stone. But none that would so excite young children. “Be at my home in thirty days. Bring everything you will need, come alone the last mile. I will have much drudge work for you there. Sweeping of paths, cleaning of the garden, clearing weeds and such. I will also begin teaching you.”

She stood, feeling exhaustion roll over her. It was a draining chant to use, and in fact this was the only use for it anyone had ever found, but it did have its use. ‘*Huakava*’ she said in her mind. ‘*I’m going to kick that grey tail of yours over your head.*’ Leaving the children she started back to the still cursed aircraft. She had students now. Since her own apprentice she had taught no one. It was a good feeling.

A brilliant morning sun reflected off the silver aircraft, waking Oharu from her sleep as its mirrored surface caused a beam or rose colored light to strike her closed eyes. Rubbing away sleep she moved a bit, slipping aside from those blinding rays. The feline was back, and in her form fitting native dress she was quite alluring. In fact, very alluring. Pushing away that thought Oharu went over in her mind what she had managed since

returning. One thread, one simple thread of the boy's curse was gone. It was a knot most would simply try to cut, but cutting this kind of knot would only snarl it worse. She would have to release each thread as she could. It would be easier if the woman below would help. All she had to do was change her entire attitude 180 degrees, to become something she never had been, had no desire to be. All she had to do was destroy what she was now and become something else. Irritation washed over the mouse. By breaking that one law those three had nearly doomed the feline. Well, she needed the practice anyway, and the girl was really cute.

Standing she made her way down to the busy woman. A scent of oil, aviation gasoline and other technological things filled Oharu's nose. As she reached the craft she made a soft noise. Waited, then reached down, picked up a tiny stone and bounced it off the felines very sweet looking right buttock. It had the desired effect, Angelica Silfverlindh pulled out of an access hatch and turned to look at her attacker with an angry expression on her beautiful face. "You want what?" she asked, quickly realizing Oharu was too far away to have actually touched her there, and small enough to probably kick halfway up the mountain if she wanted too.

"You waste your time" Oharu answered. "You, and your airship have been cursed. You cannot leave Spontoon. You Miss Angelica, will never fly again, as a pilot. Not that aircraft."

Angelica laughed. "Cursed? By you?"

"No, I would never do such a thing. You were cursed by three small children, to be truthful. Nor have they the experience, or knowledge to remove this curse."

"So what do I have to do? Pay you to release it? Buy cheap beads or go through some strange ritual? Come on, what's the scam."

"There is no scam Miss Angelica. I want nothing from you. If you wish I will try to unravel the web they have created. But..." She took a breath through her mouth, Angelica's scent was maddeningly filling her mind. What was the moon's phase right now? Oh, that explained it. "Miss Angelica, I am but a single priestess, I cannot defeat easily that which three gifted but untrained children managed to create. If you wish my help I will do what I can, without asking anything from you. You were harmed, part of my duty is to help those so harmed."

"But you can't do it alone you say. Why not?"

Oharu stepped back, away from the angry, but enticing female. How deeply had she delved into those threads? Had she too been temporally affected. It was possible. "You can. Completely by yourself. All you would have to do is destroy what you are Miss Angelica. To become something you are not, have no desire to be. That is wrong. That..." her mind stumbled, she had to get away. "I... I must go. Now." Turning the mouse ran away, up the path she had just walked down. A full moon tonight, no she could not be here. Let another take advantage, it was completely against her training. As much as the twisted thread had touched her own mind, what it was doing to Angelica was worse.

But the feline was beautiful, even without the curse. She had watched her so long she could draw her in her sleep. Such delicate curves, such a sweet smile when she was happy.... No, she must not think of such things. She ran away and her face burned as Angelica's laughter followed her. Oh were those three going to have the roughest training she could think of. She would return tonight, after the European had left, and try to remove another thread. But the one she needed to remove was deep within that nest. A glimpse was all she had been given. It would be a very long time before she could reach that thread. At least she would have the proper guards up from now on. Who would have thought that a child's wish to simply 'Love my sisters' would have such a result.

***** END PART 2*****